

Women at Home

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In recent years some scholars have tended to imagine Byzantine women as living in a male-dominated environment, in a military society where men inevitably exercised power, under the oppression of “patriarchy.”¹ It is not the purpose of this paper to reconsider the evidence invoked to demonstrate that Byzantine women were victims of sexual bias. Probably they formed politically a “second class,” despite a significant number of influential empresses; probably they formed a “second class” ideologically as well, despite the enormously important role of the Virgin Mary in all areas of spiritual life and despite the principle that sanctity is equally available to both genders and all ages. The goal of this paper is much more modest and limited: to examine the role of women within the household.

The study of this topic is hampered by the lack of adequate sources. Relevant documents are rare and come primarily from the later centuries. Archaeological data concerning private houses are sparse. Byzantine writers concentrated their attention on political and religious events, and only casually referred to everyday life within the private house. Since these authors often write about events and relationships of the past, the dating of the situation described becomes in many cases problematic: it is difficult to establish whether the author (especially a hagiographer) was describing relationships he could observe in his own day or repeated, more or less mechanically, information he had found in texts produced several hundred years before his birth.

There is another difficulty we must face: the contradictory nature of our sources. The causes of these contradictions are uncertain: they may be caused by the chronological distance separating different sources, by local particularities, or by the political, ethical, and religious views of the authors we use. I am far from claiming a final solution of the problem; this paper is no more than a cautious, tentative attempt to reconsider the idea of the Byzantine “patriarchy” and to demonstrate the lack of evidence that in everyday relations women were really oppressed by members of the other sex. I focus on relations

I am extremely grateful to Angeliki Laiou, Alice-Mary Talbot, and Sharon Gerstel for their help on this article.

¹The formulations by J. Herrin, “In Search of Byzantine Women: Three Avenues of Approach,” in *Images of Women in Antiquity*, ed. Av. Cameron and A. Kuhrt, 2nd ed. (Detroit, Mich., 1993), 167, and C. Galatariotou, “Holy Women and Witches: Aspects of Byzantine Conceptions of Gender,” *BMGS* 9 (1984–85), 56f, 78 n. 79. Milder is the statement by M. Angold, *Church and Society in Byzantium under the Comneni, 1081–1261* (Cambridge, 1995), 440: “Women occupy an ambivalent role in a patriarchal society.”

between men and women in the ninth through twelfth centuries, only in exceptional cases referring to earlier or later periods, accompanying such cases with explanatory and warning provisos.

LITERARY EVIDENCE ON THE SECLUSION OF WOMEN

I begin with several well-known texts of the eleventh century. Michael Attaleiates, describing the earthquake of 1064, affirms that women, usually kept at home (θαλαμειόμενοι), were shaken by fear, forgot their shame, and ran to open places.² Even more explicit is a contemporary of Attaleiates, the author of the *Precepts and Anecdotes*, Kekaumenos. Cautious in every regard, Kekaumenos does not want to offer hospitality to his friends. "If you admit a friend to your house," he muses, "your wife, your daughters, and your daughters-in-law will be unable to leave their room (οἶκημα) and do the necessary housekeeping."³ He also advises: "Keep your daughters confined (ἐγκεκλεισμένοι) like criminals."⁴ A third writer, Michael Psellos, relates that during the riot of 1042 women who had never before been seen outside the women's quarters (γυναικωνίτιδος ἔξω) wreaked havoc publicly.⁵

If we move back to the ninth and tenth centuries, we find similar testimonies. John Kaminiates (whether his book was a contemporary account of the capture of Thessalonike in 904 or a 15th-century forgery) deplores the fate of his city plundered by the Arabs in 904; virgins, he laments, who had never stepped out of their household (οἰκουρία), who used to be safely preserved for marriage, were now scurrying through public squares in the company of other women.⁶ The *vita* of Philaretos the Merciful, written by his grandson Niketas of Amnia in the early ninth century, presents a similar situation observed from another viewpoint: when the emperor's envoys asked Philaretos to show them his daughters and granddaughters, the saint answered: "My lords, even though we are poor, our daughters never leave their room (κουβούκλιον); if you wish, my lords, enter the *koubouklion* and gaze at them."⁷ The father of Theophano, the future wife of Leo VI, never allowed his daughter to go out, except to the bathhouse, to which she was sent either late in the evening or early in the morning, accompanied by numerous servants and maids.⁸

We may add to these statements a passage from the hagiographical collection of Symeon Metaphrastes. Symeon lived and wrote in the second half of the tenth century, but he included in his collection of saints' lives older *vitae*, sometimes in their pristine form, sometimes substantially revised. Among other tales he relates the moving story of two

²Michael Attaleiates, *Historia*, ed. I. Bekker (Bonn, 1853), 88.13–15.

³*Sovety i rasskazy Kekavmena*, ed. G. Litavrin (Moscow, 1972), 202.16–18.

⁴*Ibid.*, 220.11–12.

⁵Michele Psello, *Imperatori di Bisanzio*, ed. S. Impellizzeri, I (Milan, 1984), 216: V:26.3–5.

⁶Ioannes Caminiates, *De expugnatione Thessalonicae*, ed. G. Böhlig (Berlin-New York, 1973), 35.66–70.

⁷M. H. Fourmy and M. Leroy, "La vie de s. Philarète," *Byzantion* 9 (1934), 139.31–34. Another redaction of the *vita* designates the women's quarters as οἰκόσκος; see A. Vasiliev, "Zhitie Filareta Milostivogo," *IRAİK* 5 (1900), 76.11–14.

⁸BHG 1794, ed. E. Kurtz, "Zwei griechische Texte über die hl. Theophano, die Gemahlin Kaisers Leo VI.," *Zapiski Akademii nauk* 8, istor.-filol., 3.2 (1898), 3.25–30.

fourth-century martyrs, the siblings Eulampios and Eulampia: after Eulampios' arrest his sister left the maidens' quarters (παρθενικῶν θαλάμων) and mixed with the crowd, exposing herself to men's stares; this statement belongs to Symeon himself and is absent from the anonymous martyrion preceding Symeon's menologion.⁹ We do not know when the earlier martyrion was written, but the observation concerning "maidens' quarters" was made by the tenth-century hagiographer.

Some late Byzantine sources describe the confinement of women in a similar manner: according to Doukas, the Ottomans who captured Constantinople in 1453 bound young men together with virgins upon whom the sun had never shone and whom even their fathers had rarely seen.¹⁰ A similar formula is employed in the Trebizond redaction of the epic of Digenes Akritas: "Digenes looked at and spoke to the [girl] whom the sun had never seen";¹¹ her seclusion did not, however, prevent her from giving Digenes a ring and asking the young knight not to forget her. A well-informed outsider, Francesco Filelfo, who visited Constantinople in 1420–27 and married a Greek woman, asserted that noble Byzantine matrons never conversed either with strangers or their fellow citizens, and never left their houses, except in the dark, with covered faces and accompanied by servants or relatives.¹²

Here is a series of independent sources, produced in different chronological periods, the authors of which unanimously emphasize the existence of a system of confinement of women. At the same time there is a broad gamut of other texts showing that Byzantine women moved freely, were economically active, participated in political and religious conflicts, in charitable activity, and did not abstain from extramarital love affairs.¹³ If we believe Attaleiates, or Psellos, or Doukas, women were hardly allowed to see the sun, but in the *vita* of Antony the Younger we find a different picture. When an Arab fleet approached Attaleia and the enemy prepared to attack the city, Antony (serving at that time as the governor of Attaleia) ordered all the population capable of bearing arms to take their places on the city walls; there were not only men but young women as well, disguised in male apparel.¹⁴ In the eighth century, we are told, women and children participated in the public slaughter of Stephen the Younger.¹⁵

Let us turn again to a questionable source, Symeon Metaphrastes, who in the tenth century revised the old legend of St. Thekla which relates that Thekla, upon arrival in Antioch, was attacked by the rich nobleman Alexander; since she refused to follow him, he tried to drag her to the magistrate. Symeon supplements this skeletal episode of the original with a picture of women who were present at the attack and who "felt sympathy with their gender and considered this event as their common business"; shouting "A

⁹BHG 617, ed. PG 115:1060D; cf. AASS, Oct. 5:75A.

¹⁰Ducas, *Istoria Turco-Byzantinâ*, ed. V. Grecu (Bucharest, 1958), 367.9–10.

¹¹*Digenes Akrites*, ed. E. Trapp (Vienna, 1971), 185.1732–33.

¹²S. Moraïtis, "Sur un passage de Chalcondyle relatif aux Anglais," *REG* 1 (1888), 97; see L. Bréhier, "La femme dans la famille à Byzance," *AIPHOS* 9 (1949), 108.

¹³See, for instance, L. Garland, "The Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women," *Byzantion* 58 (1988), 361–93.

¹⁴BHG 142, ed. A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, *Sylloge Palaistines kai Syriakes hagiologias* (PPSb 19.3 [1907]), 199.1–4.

¹⁵BHG 1666, ed. PG 100:1177A.

bad solution!" they gathered before the seat of the *hegemon*.¹⁶ Certainly, Symeon was not astonished at a throng of women in the streets of a big city.

Another episode related to women's participation in male entertainment, to the best of my knowledge, has not yet been used by scholars in their study of feminine independence. According to Niketas of Amnia, female family members were not permitted to participate in the dinner his grandfather Philaretos arranged in the eighth century for the envoys from Constantinople; we find quite a different picture in the twelfth century. Niketas Choniates describes a banquet given by Emperor Isaac II Angelos, during which the basileus asked to be passed some salt; ἐνέγκατέ μοι ἅλας were his words.¹⁷ But the Greek ἅλας (salt) sounds exactly like ἄλλας, "other [women]," and the mime Chaliboures immediately played on the similarity of the two words. "Let us come to know these," he exclaimed, referring evidently to women who attended the banquet, "and then command others to be brought in."¹⁸

Thus our sources are ambivalent: on the one hand, we hear that women were confined within the women's quarters and, on the other, they moved freely, participated in economic activities, attended banquets. How can such a dichotomy be resolved?

A. Laiou has suggested what may be called a historical approach.¹⁹ Referring to Attaleiates' statement that women were normally confined to their homes, she called it "the last [evidence] to show the gynaeceum as part of social reality." She discarded then as an archaism the passage in Eustathios of Thessalonike's twelfth-century commentary on John of Damascus²⁰ in which Eustathios explained the homonymy of the word κόρη, which meant both "maiden" and "pupil of the eye." He says: "This [word] *kore* is [also] applied metaphorically (κατὰ ἀναφοράν) to the *kore* of the eye, our beloved [part of the body], since each virgin-*kore* is beloved by [her] loving parents; they deem it worthy to [keep her] guarded (φυλακῆς) like the pupil of our eye, likewise confined (θαλαμειομένη) under the eyelids." Laiou is absolutely right: the situation of women in the twelfth century differed substantially from that in the preceding centuries,²¹ and we can hardly expect Byzantine women to be locked in women's quarters in the days of Eustathios. As for the observation made by Filelfo, she cautiously acknowledges that "he may have been describing a new reality." Thus, according to Laiou, women were confined in Byzantium up to the eleventh century, more or less emancipated in the twelfth, and confined again in the new social conditions on the eve of the fall of Constantinople.

Another approach to the problem is, however, not impossible. In the formulation of M. Angold with regard to the issue of the confinement of women, "there was a discrep-

¹⁶BHG 1719, ed. PG 115:833c; cf. BHG 1717, ed. G. Dagron, *Vie et Miracles de sainte Thècle* (Brussels, 1978), par. 15.

¹⁷Nicetas Choniates, *Historia*, ed. J. L. van Dieten (Berlin-New York, 1975), 441.23 (hereafter NikChon). The difficulty in the interpretation of this passage consists in the possibility that Chaliboures could have meant actresses brought in for the entertainment of the male company; such an explanation, however, is not mandatory.

¹⁸*O City of Byzantium: Annals of Niketas Choniates*, trans. H. Magoulias (Detroit, Mich., 1984), 242.

¹⁹A. Laiou, "The Role of Women in Byzantine Society," *JÖB* 31.1 (1981), 249–60.

²⁰PG 136:732BC.

²¹See also A. Kazhdan and A. Wharton Epstein, *Change in Byzantine Culture in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Berkeley, Calif., 1985), 101f.

ancy between stereotype and reality,”²² or the usual ambivalence of Byzantine society. Let us come back to the statements concerning “confinement” and analyze them more carefully. The first jarring note is our authors’ disagreement with regard to who was confined in the women’s quarters—all women, or only noble women, or only young unmarried maidens (“virgins”). Second, our authors present primarily cases when the “rule of confinement” was broken—by natural or political disasters, or by the intrusion of strangers, whether friends of the family or imperial envoys. Finally, it is noteworthy that the terms for the place of confinement are varied: it seems that there was no single specific term to designate women’s quarters. The expression γυναικεῖος οἶκος²³ meant in the Byzantine vocabulary not a gynaeceum but a convent. Ph. Koukoules, who believed in the seclusion of Byzantine women, listed various names for the parts of the Byzantine house; he did not include, however, any specific term for the rooms assigned to women.²⁴

To summarize: while the works of Eustathios are unquestionably metaphorical, the sentences of Attaleiates or Psellos or other writers quoted above present another rhetorical figure of speech—hyperbole (“Even the fathers rarely saw their daughters”), and they should not be taken at face value. Theodore of Stoudios, in his panegyric of his mother, praised her for keeping her daughter away from men’s gaze and prohibiting the girl to wear jewelry;²⁵ it would be far-fetched to assert, on the basis of this sentence, that young girls in Byzantium did not experience the joy of expensive adornment. In fact, the sentence implies that it was normal for Byzantine girls to be exposed to men’s gaze and to wear jewelry. The meaning of the statements collected above is: “Our women and especially our maidens are chaste, and their appearance in public would contradict the image of the role model that our society has created.” This is a moral (“ideological”) construct, not actual reality. Only if we find palpable traces of the Byzantine gynaeceum shall we be entitled to speak about the confinement of women in the empire of the Rhomaioi.

It goes without saying that Byzantine empresses had their private chambers that were well guarded and off-limits to strangers. Empress Zoe used them for feminine pursuits, the manufacture of fragrant unguents, but other Byzantine queens preferred wielding power to concerns about eternal beauty. Pulcheria, the elder sister of Theodosios II, or Theodora, the famous wife of Justinian I, are inappropriate examples, since they belong to the proto-Byzantine period, and I strongly believe that the empire underwent a drastic change in social and political structure in the seventh century. But we can easily find later examples of women who administered imperial power, such as Irene, Constantine VI’s mother; Theodora, widow of Emperor Theophilos; Zoe Karbonopsis, the dowager queen mother of Constantine VII; or Anna Dalassene, in whom her son Alexios I placed absolute trust.

²²Angold, *Church and Society*, 433.

²³BHG 65, ed. H. Delehay, *Les saints stylites* (Brussels, 1923), 161.17–18. R. F. Taft, in his paper in this volume entitled “Women at Church in Byzantium: Where, When—and Why?” has persuasively shown (pp. 31ff, 86–87) that a term from the same root, γυναικίτης, designated a part of the church building that by no means was reserved for women only.

²⁴On the inner rooms of the house, including the kitchen, see Ph. Koukoules, *Βυζαντινῶν βίος καὶ πολιτισμός*, IV (Athens, 1951), 294–313. The short paragraph on the θαλάμεις (II [1948], 166–68) does not contain data other than those cited at the beginning of this article.

²⁵PG 99:888A.

It is clear that empresses moved outside their private chambers. Michael III invited his mother Theodora to his quarters to play a practical joke on her: she was shortsighted and did not recognize the court jester under his patriarchal attire. The pious Theophano, Leo VI's spouse, freely moved around Constantinople and deplored her misfortune to the *hegoumenos* Euthymios, the future patriarch. And I doubt that the Georgian princess Maria, the wife of Michael VII and subsequently of Nikephoros III, whom the young Alexios Komnenos obviously courted, was a victim of seclusion. We had better leave the empresses aside as an atypical case: the private chambers of the empress did not differ much from the *kouboukleion* of the emperor, also secluded, also inaccessible to strangers, men and women alike.

Did noble ladies have their quarters of seclusion? The most striking case to the contrary is the story of Andronikos Komnenos' incestuous love affair with the niece of Emperor Manuel I, a young widow named Eudokia.²⁶ She followed him to the military camp at Pelagonia where she stayed in a tent²⁷ without prompting anyone's amazement. Her blood relations surrounded the tent but failed to catch Andronikos. The romantic episode is well known from the account of Ch. Diehl, so I shall spare the reader the savory details. What matters for our purposes is the noble lady dwelling in a tent in a military camp, and not in a gynaeceum. But this is the twelfth century.

Probably the most famous Byzantine description of an aristocratic mansion is that of the "palace" built by Digenes Akritas on the Euphrates.²⁸ Within a fence there was a three-story building behind which a second house was constructed. The mansion also included a tower with a cruciform triklinos (another version speaks of ἀνδρῶνες σταυροειδεῖς) and two other chambers, two *chamotriklinoi* (the halls on the ground floor?), a church of St. Theodore, a bathhouse, and guest houses; the buildings were surrounded by a gorgeous garden and adorned by mosaics. Not only is there no place for women's quarters in this description, but the author fixes our attention on the togetherness of the life of both sexes: Digenes' mother is said to live in the "glorious house" with her son and daughter-in-law, and at the signal for meals Digenes appears with his wife and immediately afterward "his most beautiful mother" enters.

Certainly, the epic of Digenes is an enigmatic text. The long-standing discussion as to whether the Escorial or Grottaferrata version is primary is far from settled,²⁹ but it has little relevance to our problem, since the longest description of the mansion survives in the Trebizond redaction, whereas the two main versions preserve only scraps of the picture. The date of the epic is under discussion as well: H. Grégoire's view that the epic

²⁶NikChon, 104f.

²⁷Magoulas, *O City*, 60, translates, "He [Andronikos] was lying in the woman's embraces in *his* tent." The Greek text, however, has no possessive pronoun; Choniates just says ἐπὶ σκηνῆς (NikChon 104.49). Since we are told later that Andronikos jumped out of the tent leaving Eudokia behind, and that she was able to suggest her lover disguise himself in a woman's dress and call her maidservants by name (105.59–61), the scene evidently took place in *her* tent. According to Ch. Diehl (*Figures byzantines*, II [Paris, 1938], 95–98), Andronikos joined his mistress "dans la tente qu'elle occupait."

²⁸*Digenes Akrites*, ed. Trapp, 326–43. On it, see A. Xyngopoulos, "Τὸ ἀνάκτορον τοῦ Διγενῆ Ἀκρίτα," *Laographia* 12 (1948), 547–88; M. Andronikos, "Τὸ παλάτι τοῦ Διγενῆ Ἀκρίτα," *Ἐπιστημονικὴ Ἐπετηρὶς τῆς Φιλοσοφικῆς σχολῆς Θεσσαλονίκης* 11 (1969), 7–15.

²⁹See the survey of the problem in C. Galatariotou, "The Primacy of the Escorial Digenes Akrites: An Open and Shut Case?" in *Digenes Akrites: New Approaches to Byzantine Heroic Poetry*, ed. R. Beaton and D. Ricks (Aldershot, 1993), 38–54.

originated in a Paulician milieu around 900³⁰ seems to have been rejected and forgotten; A. Syrkin, in a monograph practically unknown in the West, placed the composition of the poem between the 970s and 1020s;³¹ H. G. Beck distinguished the “Emir-Lied” of the tenth century from the “Digenes-Roman” of the eleventh or twelfth century;³² according to P. Magdalino, the Grottaferrata version fits well into the revival of the twelfth century,³³ while S. Alexiou dates the Escorial redaction to the early twelfth century.³⁴ The problem of Digenes’ residence becomes even more complicated if one takes into consideration M. Andronikos’ suggestion that an ancient source (Plato) could have influenced the description of the mansion, or the assumption of N. Oikonomides that the epic reflects relations in Asia Minor in the tenth and eleventh centuries. We may reach only a very limited and negative result: the author of the epic does not mention the existence of a gynaeceum.

In contrast to *Digenes Akritas*, the will (*diataxis*) of Michael Attaleiates of 1077 (the same Attaleiates who asserted that all noble ladies in Byzantium were confined in women’s quarters until the earthquake of 1064 shook and shocked Byzantine society) is a precisely dated documentary source.³⁵ In this will Attaleiates describes two houses he transferred to the poorhouse he founded in Rhaidestos: one located in Rhaidestos and the other in Constantinople. Attaleiates found the house in Rhaidestos completely demolished, and its restoration was costly; later on, Attaleiates joined other properties to it and “made a single house” (27.155) that he intended to use for storage of products of all kinds. The second house Attaleiates bought from his aunt Anastaso in the capital; its description is more detailed. The house had a hall on the ground floor (κατώγειον τοῦ τρικλίνου) facing the courtyard of another house as well as a gallery (ήλιακός), and a three-story room (τρίπατον κουβούκλειον) where a donkey-driven mill was positioned (29.179). No women’s quarters were mentioned in the *diataxis*. Certainly, an *argumentum ex silentio* is not proof, but in any case Attaleiates does not confirm the existence of the Byzantine gynaeceum.

The tenth-century *vita* of Basil the Younger introduces us to a different world of humble people. One of them is Theodora, the faithful servant of the saint, who in her youth was a maiden slave in a noble house in Constantinople. Married by the order of her master, she gave birth to two children; after her spouse’s death, she brought up her children alone. The master provided her with a tiny cell located in the vestibule (προαύλιον) of the mansion,³⁶ not a good place for women’s quarters. Another minor female character of the *vita* is Melitine, the wife of the *misthios* Alexander. She obviously was not

³⁰H. Grégoire, “Notes on the Byzantine Epic,” *Byzantion* 15 (1940–41), 92–103.

³¹A. Syrkin, *Poema o Digenise Akrite* (Moscow, 1964), 140.

³²H. G. Beck, *Geschichte der byzantinischen Volksliteratur* (Munich, 1971), 96; cf. N. Oikonomides, “L’*épopée* de Digénis et la frontière orientale de Byzance aux Xe et XIe siècles,” *TM* 7 (1979), 375–97.

³³P. Magdalino, “Digenes Akrites and Byzantine Literature: The Twelfth-Century Background to the Grottaferrata Version,” in *Digenes Akrites*, ed. Beaton and Ricks (as above, note 29), 1–14. Cf. R. Beaton, “Cappadocians at Court: Digenes and Timarion,” in *Alexios I Komnenos*, ed. M. Mullett and D. Smythe, I (Belfast, 1996), 330–33.

³⁴S. Alexiou, “Ἱστορικά καὶ γεωγραφικά στὸν Διγενῆ Ἀκρίτη,” in *Εὐφρόσυλον: Ἀφιέρωμα στὸν Μ. Χατζηδάκη*, I (Athens, 1991), 39.

³⁵P. Gautier, “La Diataxis de Michel Attaliat,” *REB* 39 (1981), 5–143. On this document, see P. Lemerle, *Cinq études sur le XIe siècle byzantin* (Paris, 1977), 65–112.

³⁶BHG 264b, ed. S. G. Vilinskij, *Zhitie sv. Vasilija Novogo v russkoj literature* (Odessa, 1911), 301.5–6. On Theodora, see Ch. Angelide, “Δοῦλοι στὴν Κωνσταντινούπολη τὸν 10^ο αἰ.,” *Symmeikta* 6 (1985), 40f.

confined to a gynaeceum, since she slept with almost all the men in the neighborhood, and even tried to seduce Gregory, the author of the *vita*, following him brazenly in the daytime.³⁷

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE ON WOMEN'S QUARTERS IN BYZANTIUM

We have some, albeit few, archaeological remains of Byzantine houses. Will their examination substantiate or contradict the possibility of the existence of women's quarters in the abodes of the ordinary citizens of the empire? Before moving into this field I have to emphasize that I claim no professional knowledge of Byzantine architecture, but hope that my ineptitude and the desire to correct my mistakes will attract archaeologists to the problem. It has been frequently stressed that the history of the private house in Byzantium has not yet been properly studied. The only general study, that by L. de Beylié,³⁸ is hopelessly obsolete, and the data referring to the period after the late Roman Empire are scanty and not yet summarized.³⁹ Scholarly evaluation of the development of private buildings ranges from emphasis on the preservation of the ancient architectural tradition⁴⁰ to the idea of radical change at the end of the late Roman period.⁴¹ It is quite natural, in such a state of investigation, that my notes are extremely tentative.

Let us assume, together with S. Ellis, that the construction of Roman peristyle houses ended around the middle of the sixth century, and simultaneously a system of "subdivision" was developed. By the term "subdivision" Ellis understands the creation of small rooms inside preexisting buildings which were turned into collections of small apartments. Evidently, these communities of small apartments are not compatible with the concept of closed women's quarters, such as is suggested by the ground plan of a large and rich Athenian house from the fourth century (House B on the Areopagus),⁴² which allows one to assume the possibility of a gynaeceum; in any event, on the opposite (east) side from the main unit, there was a smaller court, with a well, surrounded by small rooms; this court formed an independent unit, access to which was only through a passageway. It is premature to express an opinion concerning the frequency of such a plan.

Houses of the tenth through twelfth centuries were built on a different plan (I leave aside the question of whether this plan reproduces the ancient tradition or not). A Corinthian house in the southwest quarter consisted of four rooms situated on two sides of a courtyard that was enclosed on the other sides by two(?) buildings. The north room probably served for storage. A door on the east side of the courtyard led to a smaller room behind which lay the largest chamber of the complex, divided into two sections by a pair

³⁷ Vilinskij, *Zhitie*, 320f.

³⁸ L. de Beylié, *L'habitation byzantine* (Grenoble-Paris, 1902).

³⁹ A survey was suggested by Ch. Bouras in "Houses in Byzantium," *Δελτ.Χριστ.Αρχ.* 'Ετ. 11 (1982–83), 1–26; cf. his "Κατοικίες και οίκισμοι στη βυζαντινή Ελλάδα," in *Οίκισμοι στην Ελλάδα*, ed. D. B. Doumanes and P. Oliver (Athens, 1974), 30–52.

⁴⁰ A. Kriesis, *Greek Town Building* (Athens, 1965), 185f; cf. J. Travlos, *Παλαιοδομική εξέλιξις τῶν Ἀθηνῶν* (Athens, 1960).

⁴¹ Especially in the works by S. Ellis, "The End of the Roman House," *AJA* 92 (1988), 565–76, and "La casa," in *La civiltà bizantina: Oggetti e messaggio* (Rome, 1993), 167–226. Cf. J.-P. Sodini, "L'habitat urbain en Grèce à la veille des invasions," in *Villes et peuplement dans l'Illyricum protobyzantin* (Paris, 1984), 396.

⁴² A. Frantz, *Late Antiquity: A.D. 267–700, The Athenian Agora* 24 (Princeton, N.J., 1988), 39f.

of columns.⁴³ Obviously, there is no place for a separate gynaecium in this house: the life of the family had to be concentrated in the large room partitioned by columns. A twelfth-century one-story farmhouse at Armatova (in Elis) consisted of three small interconnected rooms (one with the outline of rectangular benches) and a wooden shelter or lean-to (a barn or kitchen?);⁴⁴ there is no persuasive trace of women's quarters in the plan. A similar phenomenon is noted in the tenth-century foundation in Messenian Nichoria (Peloponnesos): the main chamber forms a rectangular space to which an apsidal oven is annexed; another rectangular room directly adjoins the main hall's north wall.⁴⁵ The tenth-century houses in Cherson usually had a courtyard with sheds for storage; the courtyard separated the house from the street (later the courtyards were positioned mostly behind the houses), and the entrance to the buildings led through the courtyard. Several independent two-story buildings surrounded the courtyard; they had storage areas on the ground floor (sometimes dug-in), the access to which was only through the second floor;⁴⁶ there is thus no place for isolated women's quarters in the private houses of Cherson. The later (ca. 1250) settlement of Geraki (Lakonian plain)⁴⁷ included primarily two-story rectangular buildings in which the upper floor served as a dwelling area; it had a separate entrance, which means that the room was not secluded.

In these ordinary houses, emphasis was laid on the privacy of the whole unit separated from the street⁴⁸ (even though each locality formed, in principle, a community of several houses with its own square and chapel) and not on the privacy of the individual sections that might have been assigned to women. Later documents (from 14th-century Thessalonike) also show ordinary houses connected with the outer world only through a gateway between the courtyard and the street.⁴⁹ A Hebrew marriage contract of 1022 from the town of Mastaura on the Meander River describes the dowry of a certain Eudokia as well as gifts she received from her bridegroom and his mother; Eudokia's mother-in-law conferred on the bride the ground floor of her house with an entrance facing the river.⁵⁰ This room opening to the outer world is a far cry from our perception of a closed space assigned to women. A will of 1049 originating from a Greek community in South Italy conveys a different story: Gemma, the owner, bequeaths to the sons of her nephew Leo a house or room (οἶκημα) in which she had slept (κατακέκλιμαι).⁵¹ The wom-

⁴³R. L. Scranton, *Mediaeval Architecture in the Central Area of Corinth*, Corinth 16 (Princeton, N.J., 1957), 66f.

⁴⁴J. Coleman, "Excavation of a Site (Elean Pylos) near Agraridochori," *Ἀρχ.Δελτ.* 24.2 (1969), 157 and plan 4. A similar ground plan is found in some Byzantine houses in the Mani. See T. Moschos and L. Moschou, "Παλαιομανιάτικα: Οἱ βυζαντινοὶ ἀγροτικοὶ οἰκισμοὶ τῆς Λακωνικῆς Μάνης," *Ἀρχαιολογικὰ Ἀνάλεκτα ἐξ Ἀθηνῶν* 14.1 (1981), 19–22, plan 3.

⁴⁵W. A. McDonald, W. D. E. Coulson, and F. Rosser, *Excavations at Nichoria in Southwest Greece*, III (Minneapolis, Minn., 1983), 361.

⁴⁶A. L. Jakobson, *Rannesrednevekovijskij Khersones* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1959), 296f. For the later period, see his *Srednevekovijskij Khersones (XII–XIV vv.)* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1950), 86f.

⁴⁷A. M. Simatou and R. Christodouloupoulou, "Παρατηρήσεις στὸν μεσαιωνικὸ οἰκισμὸ τοῦ Γερακίου," *Δελτ. Χριστ. Ἀρχ. Ἐτ.* 15 (1991), 71–83.

⁴⁸Bouras, "Houses in Byzantium," 24f.

⁴⁹D. Papachryssanthou, "Maisons modestes à Thessalonique au XVe siècle," in *Ἀμνηστὸς στὴ μνήμη Φώτη Ἀποστολοπούλου* (Athens, 1984), 260f.

⁵⁰Th. Reinach, "Un contrat de mariage du temps de Basile le Bulgaroktone," in *Mélanges offerts à G. Schlumberger*, I (Paris, 1924), 123, no. VII.

⁵¹G. Robinson, *History and Cartulary of the Greek Monastery of St. Elias and St. Anastasius of Carbone* (Rome, 1929), doc. IV, 53.20–22.

an's bedchamber is here transferred to two young men, and had, most probably, no specific features of women's quarters.

A slight alteration made by Symeon Metaphrastes in the legend of St. Spyridon probably shows the tendency of development of the inner space of the family house. In the original *vita*, written by Theodore of Paphos in the middle of the seventh century, we read about the death of Spyridon's daughter Irene. Soon after she died, a woman came to Spyridon claiming that Irene had borrowed from her some jewelry that must still be in his house. He went to the storage room (ταμειῖον) and searched the whole house (οἶκος), but found nothing. Spyridon had no other recourse but to ask Irene herself where she had put the jewelry that she received as a deposit, and the dead girl explained it to him.⁵² Symeon Metaphrastes, preserving the main elements of the episode, says however that Spyridon searched through "her whole *oikos*" and adds below, "in the room (οικίσκον) of his daughter."⁵³ Irene of the tenth century had her room in the paternal house, but this room does not look like a gynaeceum.

We have to be very cautious: in the Ottoman house the harem that definitely existed did not form an architecturally separate, isolated part of the building as was common in Arab regions,⁵⁴ and the case of Eudokia's apartment cited above refers to a Jewish minority whose customs could differ from the habits of the dominant Greek populace. The only conclusion we may risk is that neither archaeology nor written texts confirm the existence of a Byzantine gynaeceum—they compel us neither to deny nor to accept its existence.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE HOUSEHOLD

It has been emphasized many times that the nuclear family was the center of Byzantine society and that women unquestionably played an important part in family life.⁵⁵ There are some indications that Byzantine law, after the eighth century, acknowledged a certain increase in women's property rights and in women's legal protection.⁵⁶ Leaving aside both legislation and applied law as reflected in private documents and court decisions, I draw attention to the everyday situation within the family. Again I begin with a text that has been studied many times: the laments of the henpecked husband in the first poem of Ptochoprodromos.⁵⁷ The story of a man who had to come to his own house disguised as a beggar in order to get some food from his despotic wife is obviously a caricature, but there are more serious texts showing the leading role of the mother within the family. Two great Byzantine writers, Theodore of Stoudios⁵⁸ and Michael Psellos,⁵⁹ devoted special panegyrics to their mothers, and Christopher of Mitylene praised his

⁵² P. van den Ven, *La légende de s. Spyridon évêque de Trimithonte* (Louvain, 1953), 34–36.

⁵³ PG 116:436CD.

⁵⁴ S. Ellis, "Privacy in Byzantine and Ottoman Houses," *ByzF* 16 (1991), 156.

⁵⁵ Laiou, "The Role of Women," 233–41.

⁵⁶ J. Beaucamp, "La situation juridique de la femme à Byzance," *CahCM* 20 (1977), 164–74.

⁵⁷ D. C. Hesseling and H. Pernot, *Poèmes prodromiques en grec vulgaire* (Amsterdam, 1910), 30–37; new ed. (with German trans.) by H. Eideneier, *Ptochoprodromos* (Cologne, 1991), 99–107, 177–85. On this poem, see P. Speck, "Interpolations et non-sens indiscutables," *Varia* 1 (1984), 273–309; cf. Angold, *Church and Society*, 437f.

⁵⁸ *BHG* 2422, ed. PG 99:883–902.

⁵⁹ K. N. Sathas, *Mesaionike Bibliothēke*, V (Athens, 1876; repr. Hildesheim, 1972), 3–61.

mother as an energetic and prudent housewife, eager to provide the family with food, supervising the work of the housemaids.⁶⁰ Even Neophytos the Recluse, whom C. Galatariotou describes as a consistent misogynist, appears, in her own words, “to have been directed more towards his mother than his father.”⁶¹ On the other hand, to the best of my knowledge, no Byzantine rhetorician ever produced a eulogy of his father. Gregory of Nazianzus wrote several funeral speeches for his close relatives—a brother, a sister, and his father—but Gregory’s is an early text. Niketas of Amnia wrote a *vita* of his grandfather Philaretos, but depicted him as a failure in providing for his family. Anna Komnene panegyricized Alexios I as a statesman rather than the man of the family, and even in her *Alexiad* many warm words are addressed to her mother Irene Doukaina and her grandmother Anna Dalassene. “Byzantine eulogies of women tend to be confined to mother figures,” says Galatariotou, who emphasizes the patriarchal nature of Byzantine society, but what is significant is not the interest in the “mother figure,” but the lack of the “father figure” in Byzantine rhetorical collections.

The stereotype is a powerful tool of intellectual impact on society, and it was a Byzantine hagiographical stereotype to present the strong ties between mother and child, and not those between the father and his progeny. If we believe Ignatios the Deacon, both Patriarch Tarasios and Patriarch Nikephoros were brought up by their mothers, and Methodios gives the same information about the youthful Theophanes. Probably we need an exhaustive statistical study of hagiographical discourses that I am unable to provide, but it will suffice, for the time being, to note that Symeon Metaphrastes, the tireless collector of saints’ *vitae*, gives numerous examples of ties between mother and child. In his panegyric for the apostle Timothy, Symeon praises the hero’s grandmother Lois and mother Eunike, whereas his father is characterized as Hellene (= pagan) and darnel in the good grain of Timothy’s kin, as a thorn sprouting up among roses.⁶² A similar situation is described in the *vita* of Clement of Ankyra: the saint’s mother Sophia was a good Christian, while her husband belonged to the Hellenic faction and tried to convert her to the false faith. Clement is described as “the child of the woman,” and she as his “father, teacher, and mother” simultaneously.⁶³ St. Eleutherios was a son of a noble but impious father, while his mother Euanthia followed the teaching of the apostle Paul; it was she who gave the saint his name and brought him up in good and free principles.⁶⁴ Euboule, the pious mother of St. Panteleimon, was married to Eustorgios, notorious for his ungodliness, and naturally it was the mother who educated the future saint;⁶⁵ only later did Eustorgios convert to Christianity. The early *passio* of St. Euphemia calls her the daughter of the senator Philophron and the pious woman Theodosiane. The later version of Symeon Metaphrastes diligently develops the theme of Theodorosiane’s (*sic*) religious faith: she was extremely pious and orderly, she revealed to the poor that she was truly God’s gift (he plays on the revised name of the woman), stretching out to them her generous

⁶⁰ *Die Gedichte des Christophoros Mitylenaios*, ed. E. Kurtz (Leipzig, 1903), no. 57.

⁶¹ Galatariotou, “Holy Women” (as above, note 1), 81.

⁶² BHG 1841, ed. PG 114:761A. Symeon stresses that Timothy was educated by his mother (col. 761B).

⁶³ BHG 353, ed. PG 114:816AB, 817A.

⁶⁴ BHG 571, ed. PG 115:128A. Unlike Symeon, the author of an anonymous martyrion omits the topic of the father’s impiety: the husband of Anthia is said to belong to the extremely noble family of “Anikeoroi”; see P. Franchi de’ Cavalieri, *I martirii di s. Theodoto e di s. Ariadne*, ST 6 (Vatican City, 1901), 149.5–7.

⁶⁵ BHG 1414, ed. PG 115:448C.

and benevolent hand;⁶⁶ at the same time Symeon omits the passage of the early *passio* that the saint was buried by her mother and father.⁶⁷ We also find in Symeon's collection a saintly woman Anastasia married to an impious husband with whom she, naturally, had no sexual intercourse.⁶⁸ In his menologion can be found another Anastasia, also married to a pagan and also avoiding sexual intercourse.⁶⁹ There is also a story about the parents of St. Abramios who urged him to take a wife—the mother entreating, the father commanding.⁷⁰ In all these cases the woman is better or milder than her spouse. A slight alteration in the martyrion of Artemios is typical of Metaphrastes: the original version written by a certain John (Damascene or Rhodios) states that Constantine [the Great], the son of Constans and the blessed Helen, rejected the “foolish deception of idols”; Symeon replaces the gender-neutral epithet μάταιος with the adjective πατριος, the first meaning of which is “of the father.”⁷¹ The martyr Eustratios, in another *passio*, announces that he was Christian “from maternal swaddling clothes.”⁷² “Paternal” has a bad connotation, “maternal” a good one.

In several Metaphrastic discourses, fathers are simply omitted: a widow supported by her son recovered the head of the centurion Longinus;⁷³ Symeon presents the wealthy Phrygella, healed by St. Averkios, as the mother of Poplion who held topmost dignities in Hierapolis, without mentioning her husband.⁷⁴ Three infants, victims of Emperor Numerianus, are presented solely as children of their mother Christodoule.⁷⁵ Three young girls—Theoktiste, Theodote, and Eudoxia—are featured in the *vita* of Kyros and John together with their mother Athanasia,⁷⁶ while the father is not mentioned. The female apostle Thekla is described as a daughter of Theokleia who betrothed Thekla against her will;⁷⁷ again there is no father in the narrative. Symeon begins his account of St. Hieron with the statement that his fatherland was Tyana in Cappadocia and his mother Stratonike was a pious woman;⁷⁸ later we read that Stratonike was a widow, that Hieron was concerned about his mother's solitude, and that his cut-off hand was carried to his mother.

To summarize: Symeon Metaphrastes not only found in his sources the stereotype of close ties between mothers and their children (especially sons), but also reinforced this idea by certain additions, changes, and omissions. Probably not only mother-son relations were strong in Byzantium, but also the relations between nephews and maternal

⁶⁶BHG 626, ed. F. Halkin, *Euphémie de Chalcédoine* (Brussels, 1965), 146.19–22; cf. *ibid.*, 14.16–17.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 33.1–2.

⁶⁸BHG 77, ed. PG 115:1296A.

⁶⁹BHG 82, ed. PG 116:576f.

⁷⁰BHG 8, ed. PG 115:45c.

⁷¹John of Damascus, *Die Schriften*, ed. B. Kotter, V (Berlin, 1988), 204, par. 5.4–6; PG 115:1160BC (BHG 172).

⁷²BHG 646, ed. PG 116:473c.

⁷³BHG 989, ed. PG 115:40c.

⁷⁴BHG 4, ed. Th. Nissen, *Abercii vita* (Leipzig, 1912), 97.25–28.

⁷⁵Martyrion of St. Babylas, BHG 206, ed. PG 114:976A. Numerianus first of all asked them whether they had a mother (col. 973D).

⁷⁶BHG 471, ed. PG 114:1241.

⁷⁷BHG 1719, ed. PG 115:824c.

⁷⁸BHG 750, ed. PG 116:109A. There is no such sentence at the beginning of the earlier martyrion; Stratonike appears only in a later paragraph about her widowhood (AASS, Nov. 3:331F).

uncles, as, for instance, in the case of Platon of Sakkoudion and Theodore of Stoudios. The theme of the Byzantine avunculate has not yet been touched upon.

There is a scene in the martyrion of St. Catherine, revised by Symeon Metaphrastes, that mirrors the ambivalence of Byzantine attitudes toward women: the heathen emperor Maxentius discusses the problems of faith with Catherine in Alexandria (*sic*); failing to convince her of the advantages of paganism, he organizes her debate with fifty rhetoricians. The disputants gather, confident in their art, and one of them exclaims: "What does a woman know about the profession of rhetoric!"⁷⁹ The phrase could be interpreted as patriarchal disdain of feminine intelligence, but the case is not as simple as it seems. First of all, Symeon omits the boastful sentence of the rhetorician who ridicules Catherine's desire to overturn all the rhetorical τεχνολογία even though she is unfamiliar with the vocabulary of the rhetoricians. Then he inserts the phrase crucial for our purpose: when Maxentius dispatched his encyclical to convene the disputants, he, says Metaphrastes,⁸⁰ pretended or claimed (προσποιησάμενος) that it was beneath his dignity (ἀνάξιον) to dispute with a woman. Symeon understood that a Byzantine man would assert that to compete with a woman in a rhetorical disputation was beneath his dignity, but in fact neither Maxentius nor Metaphrastes himself thought so; for Catherine won the dispute and even converted fifty skillful rhetoricians to her creed.

An exceptional case is presented in a document of the late Byzantine period. A contract of 1364, regulating relations between a [widow?] Irene Drymouchaine and her son-in-law, graphically demonstrates the power of a Byzantine woman in her own house. According to this contract, the "lady" Irene "accepted" (λαμβάνει) her son-in-law Theodore, together with her own daughter Mary, on the following conditions: they would stay under the same roof and get the same meals, but Irene would remain "the lady and hostess" until her death; she would be free to run the house as she found desirable for her spiritual salvation. The "children," however, retained the exclusive right to her inheritance.⁸¹

WOMEN'S COSTUME

The history of Byzantine costume is still to be written and will be difficult to write. With the exception of some Coptic textiles, few material remnants have survived, and Byzantine art provides us mostly with conventional images of imperial or court attire. By no means do I claim to present here a comprehensive characterization of the dress of Byzantine women;⁸² the only question I dare raise is the relationship between male and female costume.

The Byzantines distinguished between the costume of men and women; John Chry-

⁷⁹BHG 32, ed. PG 116:284c; the phrase is copied from an earlier martyrion: J. Viteau, *Passions des saints Écatérine et Pierre d'Alexandrie, Barbara et Anyisia* (Paris, 1897), 11.15.

⁸⁰PG 116:281c.

⁸¹G. Ferrari dalle Spade, "Registro Vaticano di atti bizantini di diritto privato," *SBN* 4 (1935), 264, no. VII.

⁸²Koukoules, Βίος, II.2:9f, devoted a single page to the particularities of the feminine garment. See also the paragraph "Women's Dress in the Transition Period" in M. G. Houston, *Ancient Greek, Roman and Byzantine Costume* (London, 1947), 130–34. For the discovery of a woman's caftan of Byzantine origin(?) in Birka, see I. Hägg, *Kvinmodräkten i Birka* (Uppsala, 1974), 110.

sostom, for example, insisted that men should not put on women's clothing.⁸³ Around the ninth century, Achmet discussed dreams in which men appeared dressed as women and vice versa;⁸⁴ this paragraph, however, is titled "From the Persians," and we cannot be sure that the author was describing genuine Byzantine habits. "Criminals" condemned to the parade of infamy might be dressed in female garb: according to Symeon Metaphrastes, Emperor Maximian ordered women's garments (specifically identified as women's κολώβια) to be put on Sergios and Bacchos,⁸⁵ and in the eleventh century Theophilos Erotikos was paraded in the Hippodrome in feminine attire.⁸⁶ Andronikos Komnenos refused to put on feminine garb to escape from his mistress's tent since he was afraid of being caught and humiliated, but sometime later he fled from a prison disguised as a woman.⁸⁷ A distinction between male and female costume was evident to the Byzantine eye, but to what extent was it substantial?

Ph. Koukoules has already shown that the terminology of men's and women's costume was similar. The will of the nun Mary mentions two principal terms for her cloak, ἱμάτιον and μανδύας, which reappear in the treatise of Pseudo-Kodinos as the elements of the dress of the dowager empress.⁸⁸ Both terms are commonly used for men's garments as well. Niketas of Amnia, the author of the *vita* of Philaretos the Merciful, narrates a story that demonstrates how conventional was the distinction between men's and women's dress: Philaretos gave away to a poor man his *himation* (*chiton*, in another version); when he returned home, in his underwear, his wife took her own στιχάριον, recut it in "the man's manner," and gave it to her husband.⁸⁹ The word *sticharion*, however, normally designated a man's tunic, particularly a vestment of deacons, priests, and bishops. A similar episode is narrated in the *vita* of Mary the Younger:⁹⁰ as Mary's corpse was being prepared for burial, her husband ordered that his *chiton* be recut into a female one and put on his dead wife. *Chiton* was a garment worn by men and women alike. *Kolobia*, in which Sergios and Bacchos were garbed for the parade of infamy, are usually identified as dalmatics, and were also worn by men. Even the *maphorion*, a distinctive element of feminine costume covering the head and shoulders, could serve as an item of apparel for the *praepositus* of the Senate,⁹¹ and monks could wear *maphoria* as well.

The will of the nun Mary lists several other items of costume: σάγιον (mentioned also in the will of Gemma) could also be used by men; βηλάριον designated a piece of textile, sometimes cotton, χάσδιον velvet, and φακιόλιον a head covering. The marital contract of Eudokia, which enumerates other elements of feminine attire, is in Hebrew, but the terms for clothing are mostly of Latin origin (*pallium*, *sacculus*, *sudarion*); on the other

⁸³ PG 61:216.39–40.

⁸⁴ Achmes, *Oneirocriticon*, ed. F. Drexler (Leipzig, 1925), 218.

⁸⁵ BHG 1625, ed. PG 115:1009CD.

⁸⁶ Ioannes Scylitzes, *Synopsis historiarum*, ed. I. Thurn (Berlin-New York, 1973), 429.13–17.

⁸⁷ NikChon, 105.59–60, 196.69–70.

⁸⁸ Pseudo-Kodinos, *Traité des offices*, ed. J. Verpeaux (Paris, 1966), 261.2–3.

⁸⁹ Fourmy and Leroy, "La vie" (as above, note 7), 135.13–23; the term *chiton* is used once in this story. Another version, Vasiliev, "Zhitie" (as above, note 7), 74.9–17, also uses the term *chiton*.

⁹⁰ BHG 1164, ed. AASS, Nov. 4:697A. See English trans. by A. Laiou, in *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints' Lives in English Translation*, ed. A.-M. Talbot, Byzantine Saints' Lives in Translation 1 (Washington, D.C., 1996), 267.

⁹¹ *De Ceremoniis aulae byzantinae*, ed. J. Reiske, I (Bonn, 1829), 529.20–22.

hand, the term for an item of headgear, *entrichin* (“wig”), seems to have originated from Greek.

The theme of a woman entering a male monastery in disguise is common in Byzantine hagiography, predominantly in the earlier centuries.⁹² When their transvestism was discovered, the only problem of costume that arose was the headgear, not the dress. When the gender of the fifth-century St. Matrona of Perge was revealed, the abbot asked her how she, a woman, dared to approach the holy eucharist with her head uncovered (as men would do), and Matrona described to him the trick she used to avoid discovery and at the same time to comply with the prohibition imposed on women: she claimed to suffer from a headache and raised her pallium over her head.⁹³ If we believe Arethas of Caesarea, the tenth-century emperor Alexander tried to eliminate this discriminatory tradition: he initiated a new custom of entering church with covered head.⁹⁴ This was a rule that referred to men, since women had always been supposed to cover their heads in church, and not in church only: the hagiographer of the late Roman saint Pelagia emphasized that the heroine, in her youth, was so shameless that she did not even use a light veil (θήριστρον) to cover her head.⁹⁵ The habit of covering the face continued for centuries: Anna Komnene, describing the dramatic flight of the female members of the Comnenian clan in 1081, narrates how one of them, while talking with the envoys of the emperor, raised up the linen veil (ὀθόνη) that was covering her face.⁹⁶ But in Byzantium not only women covered their faces; according to Eustathios of Thessalonike, the custom of monks was similar. He relates that monks in public places usually masked the upper half of their faces with a black hood (μέλαν παραπέτασμα), but it would quickly be raised above eye level, if the veiled man spotted any indecency worthy of observation.⁹⁷ Male and female hairstyles seem to be different; in any event, Zonaras criticizes men who imitated women in order to beautify the hair on their heads.⁹⁸

Probably the most distinctive masculine item of costume (if we discount the lack of a veil or headgear and jewelry) was trousers. Mentions of them are relatively common in Greek sources of the twelfth century,⁹⁹ but both Eustathios of Thessalonike and Niketas Choniates speak of trousers with derision, and it is possible that the custom of wearing pants was limited to a narrow group of mounted warriors. The belt was evidently a typical element of Byzantine official “male” costume, the *zoste patrikia* being the single female exception.

In other words, we again encounter typically Byzantine terminological contradiction: while the main elements of costume (cloak = *himation* or *mandyas*; tunic = *kolobion* or *sticharion*) were almost identical for men and women, the headgear and especially hairstyles were distinct, and trousers were characteristic only of a limited social category.

⁹² E. Patlagean, “L’histoire de la femme déguisée en moine et l’évolution de la sainteté féminine à Byzance,” *StMed* 17 (1976), 597–623, repr. in her *Structure sociale, famille, chrétienté* (London, 1981), no. XI.

⁹³ *BHG* 1221, ed. *AASS*, Nov. 3:794B; English trans. by J. Featherstone and C. Mango in *Holy Women*, ed. Talbot, 26.

⁹⁴ Arethas, *Scripta minora*, ed. L. G. Westerink, I (Leipzig, 1968), 90.27.

⁹⁵ B. Flusin, in *Pélagie la Pénitente: Métamorphoses d’une légende*, ed. P. Petitmengin, I (Paris, 1981), 79.36–37.

⁹⁶ Anna Comnène, *Alexiade* II:5.8, ed. B. Leib, I (Paris, 1967), 78.29.

⁹⁷ Eustathius, *Opuscula*, ed. G. L. F. Tafel (Frankfurt, 1832), 250.39–46.

⁹⁸ PG 137:848BC.

⁹⁹ Data are gathered in Kazhdan and Wharton Epstein, *Change in Byzantine Culture*, 76f.

CONCLUSION

Women's activity within the house encompasses several spheres. We have seen that the Byzantine stereotype made the mother the principal educator of children, male and female alike. It is also possible to surmise that women were responsible for cleaning the house. We may expect that women were responsible for washing clothes,¹⁰⁰ but men occasionally shared in this chore; at any rate, during the late Roman period outside the city walls of Emesa, Symeon the Fool saw ten men washing their *himatia*.¹⁰¹ Women were the cooks for the household and even cooked food to sell at market. The hagiographer of Nikon the Metanoite relates how a woman kneaded barley cakes at home, while her daughter helped by carrying water from a nearby well;¹⁰² the story has a double significance, showing as well that younger, unmarried women of the lower class moved freely outside the house. Among the items given to Eudokia by her marriage contract are kitchen utensils—a cauldron, a dish, a basin—all designated in the document by Hebrew words of Greek origin: κακκάβιν, λεβήτιν, λεκάνιν. A λεκάνη appears in the will of Gemma as well. But again, a man could possess the same kind of kitchen utensils; at any rate, the will of Skaranos lists two κακαβόπουλα (small cauldrons), several ἐπιβαλτάρια (basins), a copper vessel (χάλκομα), and some other objects of unclear meaning, before it moves on to agricultural implements.

The image of the housewife or young girl spinning, weaving, and making cloth was a *topos* of Byzantine literature throughout the centuries.¹⁰³ John Moschos relates a beautiful novelette about a young virgin who became an object of Satanic desire: a man who loved her would stay all day outside her house so that she could not go to church. She sent a maid to him, invited the man inside her house (obviously Moschos did not know that Byzantine virgins were supposed to live in strict confinement), and asked him why he kept her from going out. When the man explained that he loved her, she then asked him again: "What do you find in me so beautiful that makes you love me so passionately?" "Your eyes," he answered. The girl was sitting at the loom (ἱστόριον), so she took the weaver's shuttle (κερκίδιον) and gouged out both her eyes.¹⁰⁴ Later, the ninth-century saint Athanasia of Aegina was working at the loom (ἱστός) when she saw a vision,¹⁰⁵ and Gemma, whose will I have mentioned several times, was also involved in weaving: in her will she stipulates that skeins of wool she possessed should be given to a weaver to make a textile for a church; another clause is even more interesting, for Gemma bequeathed her loom not to a woman, but to men, the sons of her relative Leo.¹⁰⁶

The data I have presented are scanty and chronologically not homogeneous. They

¹⁰⁰ Koukoules, Βίος, II.2:203.

¹⁰¹ BHG 1677, ed. Leontios of Neapolis, *Vie de Syméon le Fou et Vie de Jean de Chypre*, ed. A. J. Festugière and L. Rydén (Paris, 1974), 97.16.

¹⁰² BHG 1366, ed. D. Sullivan, *The Life of Saint Nikon* (Brookline, Mass., 1987), 98, par. 27.1–4. On a 13th-century case involving a young woman who drew water from a spring where a Vlach sexually assaulted her, see A. Laiou, "Sex, Consent, and Coercion in Byzantium," in *Consent and Coercion to Sex and Marriage in Ancient and Medieval Society* (Washington, D.C., 1993), 165f.

¹⁰³ Laiou, "The Role of Women," 243f.

¹⁰⁴ PG 87:2913AB.

¹⁰⁵ BHG 180, ed. F. Halkin, *Six inédits d'hagiologie byzantine* (Brussels, 1987), 180.17–18. English trans. by L. Sherry in *Holy Women*, ed. Talbot, 142.

¹⁰⁶ Robinson, *History and Cartulary*, doc. IV, 53.77–79.

are not sufficient for a persuasive conclusion, but they allow us to raise the question whether there was a drastic difference between men and women within the household. I am inclined to answer this question negatively; at any rate, I was unable to discover separate dwellings in a regular house or separate kinds of utensils or strictly separate types of economic activity; even the clothing was more similar than not, with only insignificant distinctions. Certainly, the situation of women in Byzantium underwent alterations as time went on: there were periods of improvement and of decline of the social status of women. The chronological aspect of the problem of women's household activity needs a special investigation, but at the moment it seems that one of the periods of their improved circumstances was the most "military" Comnenian century: in Byzantium, as probably in the West, chivalric ideology led to a growing respect for women rather than worsening of their status. Certainly throughout all of Byzantine history there were cases of male violence, of rape, of male sexual chauvinism, but it is still to be proven that Byzantine women lived in a harem and were abused at every step as one would expect in a paradigmatic (but not real) "patriarchal" and "military" society.

Dumbarton Oaks